



## Grace in Nature and History: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited

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# Grace in Nature and History: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited<sup>1</sup>

By Niels Henrik Gregersen

**Abstract:** Interpreting Luther's Trinitarian theology of creation, it is shown how Luther's doctrine of creation is modelled on his soteriology. In his writing *Against Latomus* (1521) Luther established his famous distinction between the external grace of God (*favor dei*) and the divine gift (*donum*): the living Christ. A similar distinction can be re-constructed from Luther's theology of creation as presented in his catechisms, sermons, tracts, and exegetical writings. Just as Luther makes a distinction between the Christ who takes side for us within God, and the Christ who is dwelling in the heart of the believer, Luther makes a distinction between the fatherly love toward humankind (*benevolentia*), and the Father, Son and Spirit, who are at work from within the life of the creatures in God's blessing (*benedictio*). There is an implicit notion of a *pater pro nobis* and a *pater in nobis*, which reflects, in the order of creation, the classic distinction between *Christus pro nobis* and *Christus in nobis*. According to Luther's theology of the Eucharist and divine blessing, there exists a union between God and creature, which has a similar structure as the union between Christ and believer. There are distinctions to be drawn as well as correlations to be seen between the order of creation and the order of salvation.

**Key Terms:** Blessing, creation, Eucharist, Luther, Trinity, vocation.

"Our home, farm, field, garden, and everything, is full of Bible, where God through his wondrous works not only preaches, but also knocks on our eyes, touches our senses, and somehow enlightens our hearts."<sup>2</sup>

—Luther in "Sermon of May 25 1544"

The title of this article may give some Lutheran theologians occasion for concern. For is not grace a category, which in Luther's theology is reserved, and rightly so, for the grace of God mediated by the public proclamation of the divine promise in the Church? Hasn't God instituted the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments to be the loci for finding grace, whereas human beings can never find the divine grace in the masks of creation. It is indeed not difficult to pick out Luther quotations saying this.<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly true that Luther has only one piece of advice to the person, who is worried about eternal salvation: he or she should take refuge in the external word of God, the gospel, in which God has promised to save anyone, who clings to the Word in faith. However, this does not necessarily mean that divine grace is only channelled through the public proclamation of the church. A distinction must be made between the question of the proper *way of approaching God*, and the *reality of divine grace*. Speaking about divine grace it seems that Luther, in his theology of creation, often speaks rather unconcerned about the benevolence of God the creator, as well as of God the Father as giving Himself wholly and unreservedly to the creatures.

Thus what I aim to show is that the important distinction between the external grace of God (*favor*

*dei*), and the gift of God (*donum*), that permeates Luther's writing *Against Latomus* from 1521,<sup>4</sup> reappears in his doctrine of creation. Just as Luther makes a distinction between the Christ who takes side for us within the triune life of God, and the Christ who is dwelling in the heart of the believer, so does Luther in his catechetical writings presuppose a distinction between God's fatherly love toward humankind (*benevolentia patris*), and the work of the Father within creation in the divine blessing (*benedictio*) of created existence. There is, I shall argue, an implicit notion of the *pater pro nobis* and *pater in nobis*, which reflects, in the order of creation, the soteriological distinction between *Christus pro nobis* and *Christus in nobis*. For as Luther puts it in a sermon on Gen 22,18: "Where there is reference to blessing, there is the gospel, and where the gospel is, there is God with Christ and all his gifts."<sup>5</sup>

But even though there is grace both in God's Word and in God's works, Luther maintains a distinction between the order of creation and the order of salvation. Luther is Augustinian enough to pursue throughout his writings a distinction between earthly and spiritual matters. This distinction bears many names: *spiritualia* and *temporalia*, heavenly and earthly, God's work with the right hand and with the left hand, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, etc. What is important to my interpretation, however, is that Luther depicts God's work of creation after the model of God's work of salvation, so that the first article of faith (about creation) is permeated by the insights that flow out the gospel message of the second and third articles of faith (about the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit).

Therefore it would be a theological mistake to understand creation as giving witness only to the law of God, and not to the gospel itself. Rather my thesis is, first, that from the perspective of Luther's Trinitarian theology, the grace of God is operative in earthly as well as in spiritual matters. That human beings cannot *find* the grace of God in creation does not mean that the divine gifts of grace are not *present* in the world of creation. The distance between God and creature is not due to distortions of nature, but to human sin. Sin is what prevents the possibility of

human beings to trace God's fatherly love in creation without the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly I aim to show that Luther's theology of creation contains resources for overcoming the traditional division between a *gratia universalis* (the rising of the sun and the falling on the rain on both just and unjust sinners), and the *gratia particularis* (which confers salvation to only the few elect) – a division which Luther nonetheless maintains in his pneumatology. Luther's doctrine of the Holy Spirit is routinely divided into the work of the *Spiritus Creator* (in creation in general) and into the work of sanctification (in those who are grasp the Word of God in faith).<sup>6</sup> In his theology of creation, however, Luther overcomes this distinction, in so far as he describes God's wondrous works, and not the human distortions thereof.

There exist, I shall contend, many forms of grace in world of creation, if one only had the eyes of faith to discern it. Third, I wish to argue that the idea of a union between Christ and the believer (so rightly re-emphasized by modern Finnish Luther research) finds a correlate within Luther's doctrine of creation.<sup>7</sup> According to Luther's understanding of the eucharist, of blessing and of vocation, there exists also, what one might a *unio Creatoris et creaturae*, which has a similar structure as the *unio Christi et fidei*, though not necessarily the same full content. There are distinctions to be drawn as well as correlations to be seen between the order of creation and the order of salvation.

In what follows, I shall support these theses by reference to Luther's doctrine of creation in his catechetical theology (section 2) and in his reflections on the modes of divine presence in his eucharistic theology (section 3). In both cases it seems to be more than coincidental that Luther persistently reads Genesis 1 and John 1 as texts pointing to the workings of the same triune God. From a more topical point of view, I shall then discuss in particular Luther's interpretation of God's blessings (section 4), and the classic theme of the Christian's vocation (section 5). For as will become evident, the divine blessing of biological life, and God's callings of human beings to become his collaborators, may involve both spiritual and temporal forms of divine grace. Some theological conclusions are drawn in section 6.

## Luther's Catechetical Theology of Creation

Let me begin by Luther's plain instruction to ordinary believers about the meaning of the first article of faith in the *Small Catechism* of 1529. This classic text has been memorized over centuries and has probably contributed more to the formation of Lutheran spirituality than any other text from Luther's hand:

I believe that God has created *me together with all that exists*. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses, reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm; spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And *all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all*. For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.<sup>8</sup>

This text is so often recited that we may not recognize what is entailed in this condensed summary of Luther's view of creation. We observe, first, that the doctrine of justification is modelled after the doctrine of justification.<sup>9</sup> Just as God justifies the sinner without any merit on our part, so does God create the world without any help from a pre-existing material world. Just as we are saved for free, the world in its entirety has been created out of nothing – for free. The work of creation as well as the work of salvation is done “out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy”, without any prior contribution on the part of the creatures. From other texts, not least Luther's *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45) we know how central the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was to Luther.<sup>10</sup> What we see here is that the negative formulation “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*) is a veil for the positive formulation that the world is created out of divine love (*a amore dei*). For the love of God is not only expressed in the second and third articles

of faith, but emerges out of the divine community of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is the love of the Father who is “the Father of all” (Eph 4:6) that shines forth in the world of creation.

The second thing to notice is that being a creature is never an individual affair. The human person is born into a filled world of creation, and thus from the beginning immersed in a network of relations. Thus Luther articulates a view of creation that has three circles: the personal sphere, the communal realm, and the wider cosmic setting.

First, we first have the human person, a unity of body and soul, who has been given the sensory organs to see the world surrounding her, to smell it, taste it, touch it, and, for all, listen to it; likewise the human being has been given the capacity to interpret the meaning of the world by rational reflection and active involvement. Bodily sensation and human reasoning both belong to what we today may call the psychological realm of being a human.

Secondly, we also find ourselves placed in a network of social relations. Luther does not shy away from mentioning house and farm, spouse and children and even shoes and clothing in his enumeration of the forms of fatherly love in the midst of creation. This social realm is not something added to being a human, but is part of what it means to have the capacities of sensation and human reasoning. For sensation and rationality are given by God (passively) in order to be used (actively) in the formation of a human society. As Luther makes explicit in *The Large Catechism*, it is God who “gives all physical and temporal blessings – good government, peace, security.” But we are called to participate in the divine ruling of the social realm.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, we have third realm of non-human nature, which is only briefly indicated in *The Small Catechism*. In *The Large Catechism*, however, this cosmic embedment is spelled out in greater detail with respect to the physical universe, the rhythms of nature, the host of other animals, the plants, that nourishes human existence, and the four elements. Luther mentions “sun, moon, and stars in the heavens; day and night; air, fire, water, the earth and all that it yields and bring forth; birds, fish, animals, grain and all sorts of produce.”<sup>12</sup> Luther here follows

the anthropocentric tendency in Christian tradition of perceiving the cosmos as providing benefits for human beings in particular. The vantage point of Luther's exposition certainly is the human life-sphere. But there can also be no doubt that he wants to make an exemplary inventory of the manifold creatures by referring to the material world in its entirety. For the blessings of God the Father do not only take place in human sensation and rationality, nor only in the good social government. God's blessings also pervade the world of physical matter and biological existence.

To Luther's catechetical writings should also be counted the "Confession" that Luther added to his polemical writing against Zwingli and other enthusiasts in *Concerning Christ's Supper* from 1528. In this confession, at once a personal witness and a conscious attempt to speak on behalf on the common Christian faith, Luther shows his courage to take seriously the Trinitarian understanding of the unity of God. All Christian traditions concur that the Son of God gave himself to the world, for this is what the Bible says (e.g. Rom 4:25; 8:32; Eph. 5:2.25; 1 Tim. 2:16). Most traditions, both Eastern Orthodox and those developed in Augustinian mould, also say that the Holy Spirit is the divine gift, who dwells in the believer. But one rarely finds the expressions of the view that also the Father, the source of all divine life (*fons deitatis*), gives Himself to creation. This is nonetheless what Luther emphasises in his "Confession":

These are the three persons and one God, who *has given Himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that He is and has*. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall. Therefore the *Son subsequently gave himself and bestowed on us all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts*. But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the *Holy Spirit comes and gives Himself to us also, wholly and completely*. He teaches us to under-

stand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it.<sup>13</sup>

We find here a particularly beautiful articulation of the *threefold divine self-giving*, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to the world of creation. It is even said in clear and plain words that the primary divine self-giving comes from the Father and is exhibited in the world of creation. The fatherly love is given unreservedly, "wholly and completely", to creation. The problem is therefore not that the external grace of God is not given to all creation, but is reserved to a few: nor is the problem that the gift of the Father has not been weaved into all three life-spheres of creation, including the human realm. The problem lies with the human neglect of divine grace, which has made all the divine gifts "useless." Therefore the Son gave himself "subsequently" (that is, in incarnation), in order that we may "have the Father" – a very strong statement – and acknowledge and receive all His gifts. And again, it is not sufficient for the restoration of creation that Christ has given himself to the world. It is also necessary for the realization of the "happy exchange" between the wisdom of Christ and human folly, between the righteousness of Christ and the sins of humanity, that the humans receive the work of Christ in faith. Finally it belongs to the particularising task of the Holy Spirit to make real to the believer that which is accomplished in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit thus works *in us* by making real *for us* what is already realized in Christ.

## Creation Motifs in Luther's Eucharistic Theology

Luther does not offer any theoretical justification of the idea of creation. Rather his aim is to explicate the meaning the Christian Creed. For as he says in his *Large Catechism*, "in the Creed you have the entire essence, will, and work of God exquisitely depicted in very brief but rich words", for "in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most



profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure unutterable love.”<sup>14</sup>

But if the fatherly love of the Creator stands in the center of all three articles, why then is God's love is unutterable? Is it because God's love is so lofty that the divine love is behind the world that we see in front of us, or rather is the love of God beyond all grasp, because it is so intimately woven into the nature of creation? The answer must be “both-and”, but it is the mystery of the divine in-being in the world of creation that stands at the center of Luther's interest. Creation is a mystery, not because it is esoteric, not because it forces us to believe in a variety of supernatural truths, but because the mystery of creation takes place in the midst of everyday existence. It is, as far as I can see, the unspeakable unification of God and world, creator and creature, which is mesmerizing. If this is so, it is again insights from the second and third articles of faith that inform Luther's understanding of God being in creation.

In Luther's *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, he makes clear that the understanding of the eternal being of the divine Word of God in the heart of the Father is not amenable to rationalization, for this is a doctrine that only the Holy Spirit can create listeners to.<sup>15</sup> But exactly the same puzzle applies to the presence of the Word in the world of creation. In his *Lectures on Genesis* Luther says that “God has reserved his exalted wisdom and the correct understanding of this chapter for Himself alone, although He has left with us this general knowledge *that* the world had a beginning and *that* it was created by God out of nothing.”<sup>16</sup>

What is revealed to faith is the “that” of creation, but the “how” of divine creativity remains a mystery, not only to human rationality but also to the believer. This barrier of understanding does not only concern the riddle of the world's beginning, but also the nature of creation itself. The “how” of divine action is incomprehensible, not because God is far away from creation, but also because God is so fully woven into the fabric of creation. Let us realize, says Luther, “that God was incomprehensible in His essential rest before the creation of the world, but that now, after the creation, He is *within, without, and above* all creatures; that is, He is still incompre-

hensible. Nothing else can be said, because our mind cannot grasp what lies outside time.”<sup>17</sup>

In Luther's eucharistic theology, the mystery of divine co-presence within created reality is spelled out in quite some detail. In his book from 1527, *That These Words, ‘This is My Body’, Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*, Luther interprets what it means for Christ to sit at the right hand of the Father. As is well-known, Luther de-literalizes the notion of the heavenly throne by saying that only children believe that there is an “imaginary heaven in which a golden throne stands, and Christ sits beside the Father in a cowl and golden crown, the way artists paint it.” But all this is “childish, fleshy ideas of the right hand of God.”<sup>18</sup> For God is not sitting at a specific place, but is operative all-over: “the almighty power of God can be nowhere and yet must be everywhere.” The transcendence of God thus means that “God cannot be so [locally] determined, for it is uncircumscribed and immeasurable, beyond and above all that is or may be.”<sup>19</sup>

If the divine transcendence signifies that God cannot be contained in time and space, the divine immanence means that this one and only God is radically immanent in space, also in the smallest conceivable events. There are not two “gods”, one transcendent, another immanent, nor are there two “aspects” of God, an immanent plus a transcendent God. Rather, *the transcendent power of God must be wholly and fully present at all places*, even in the tiniest leaf or in the kernel of a peach: “God must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.”<sup>20</sup>

This is mere speculation, some will argue, since Luther here points to God as an unseen reality. If so, the question is whether Christian faith can do without any such speculation. For one can also interpret these statements of Luther as a theological explication of the inner logic of divine infinity. So understood, Luther starts out from the premise of divine incarnation that the infinite God has indeed shown capable of entering into the realm of the finite: *infinitum capax finiti*. “For in him [Jesus Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col

2:9). From this premise Luther proceeds to the logical conclusion that also the world of creation must be able to host the infinite God: *finitum capax infiniti*.

In addition to Luther's speculative exposition of the inner logic of faith, however, Luther also points to human experiences that may teach us that one and the same thing can be present at several places at once. In his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* from 1528 he mentions several examples that exemplify how something both can be localized and yet be placed at several places at one time. Luther here uses (intentionally, I suspect) a wordplay between the German "Christall" and the presence of Christ in all, the "Christ-All."<sup>21</sup> Against this background, he performs a thought experiment by analogizing the mystery of divine presence in all the world with similar mysteries within the world. Inside a crystal, one sometimes observes a kind of light-flash, and if you turn the crystal around, you will see the one and same light-flash situated at different places in the one and same crystal. In the same way with the voice of a human preacher: he or she has one voice but the voice is apprehended by five or ten thousand ears at the same time; if God can do this with an earthly voice, why can't he not then do it with his own eternal word? Or again, think of a mirror: as long as the mirror is unbroken, you see only one face in it; but if it breaks into a thousand pieces, you will see a thousand faces in the pieces of one and the same material substance. In the same way, like in the fragments of the mirror, the face of God can be found in a variety of singular experiences in creation. For: "Nothing is so small but God is still smaller; nothing so big but God is still larger . . ."<sup>22</sup>

In all cases, *Luther is interested in nature as localized interactive events*, not as one continuous line of existing "things." Most significantly, it is in the interaction between nature and human beings that the substances of nature are transformed into active events and may become bearers of divine meaning and even redemption. A mirror is normally conceived as a dead thing (and it surely is!) but in the *event of mirroring* it becomes active. In the same way with sounds and voices: they may be conceived as material waves (and they surely are!) and

ears may be labelled as a mechanical systems (as sense organs certainly also are!) but in the *event of the listening*, sounds and voices are transformed into messengers of meaning and sensual-spiritual presence.

Thus, it is not nature *per se* that is at the focus of Luther's interest. It is in the interactions between pre-human and human nature that the capacities of matter are most expressive, and can serve as both analogies to and as exemplifications of God's use of the sacramental elements. Just as bread and wine are not by themselves carriers of the body and blood of Christ, but can be *used* as such by God without altering their created nature in the context of the eucharistic meal, so are sounds, homes, fields, flowers, marital love, shoes etc. not carriers of divine grace on their own, but they may, in the context of everyday life, *become* forms of divine grace when *used* as such by God, and this can be done without altering their natural properties.

However, we need to add a third plank to Luther's argument, which does not stand in the foreground in Luther's eucharistic writings, since Luther was here concerned with the unilateral form of divine self-giving. However, in *The Bondage of the Will* and in other writings we find the central notion that God co-operates with the creatures in such a manner as give them their own work to do. God is not only *in* and *above*, but also *with* the creatures, in so far as they participate in God's creation and preservation of the world.<sup>23</sup>

We here reach the famous formula of later Lutheran eucharistic theology: God does not need to transubstantiate bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, but the body and blood of Jesus Christ is *consubstantially* present "in, with, and under" the natural bread and wine. This formula has continued to play a significant role in the current discussion between science and religion, and we have now seen its background in Luther's Eucharistic theology.

- "In" thus signifies the presence of divine power in the created world.
- "With" refers to the collaborative activity of the creatures who work with God (whether they know it or not).

- “Under” refers to God as transcending the realm of creation, while persistently using the divine power to sustain and preserve the creatures.

In the “Solid Declaration” of the *Formula of Concord* the old Lutherans pursue this idea and rightly, in my view, underscored the importance of the unification between God and creature. They also clearly point out, how the Chalcedonian pattern (“two natures in one personal person, fully divine, fully human, inseparable but without confusion”) can be used to clarify the presence of Christ in the sacraments. Thus the personal union of God and humanity in Christ (*unio personalis*) is used to model the notion of a sacramental union (*unio sacramentalis*). What I hope to show is that that the same idea of unity-in-difference can be used to explore the idea union of creativity between God and nature (*unio creatoris et creaturae*). Let us hear the exposition of the Lutheran fathers:

Just as in Christ two distinct, unaltered natures are inseparably united, so in the Holy Supper two essences, the natural bread and the true natural body of Christ, are present together here on earth in the action of the sacrament, as it was instituted. This union of Christ's body and blood with the bread and wine, however, is not a personal union, as is the case with the two natures in Christ. Rather, as Dr. Luther and our people called it . . . , it is a *sacramentalis unio* (that is, a sacramental union). With this expression they wanted to indicate that, although they use the *formae* “*in pane*”, “*sub pane*”, “*cum pane*” (that is, these various ways of speaking: “in the bread”, “under the bread”, “with the bread”), nevertheless, they accept the words of Christ in their proper sense, as they read . . . : “Hoc est corpus meum” (This is my body).<sup>24</sup>

The question is now, whether we on the basis of Luther's theology of creation could argue for similar union between God the Creator and the creatures, neither as a personal union, nor as a sacramental union, but as a union of divine creativity and the flourishing of creation. To this theme I now turn when taking a closer look at Luther's theology of blessing and vocation.

## Creation as Blessing

We already saw that creation is a mystery, not because God is behind creation, but because God is working from within creation. This becomes clear in Luther's use of the term blessing in the *Lectures on Genesis* from 1535–45.<sup>25</sup> Luther here observes that Moses does not use the term blessing until Gen 1:21–22, when speaking of the living beings. The effect of God's blessing is thus seen particularly in the “new method of procreation” exhibited in the fishes of the water and in the birds in the air. For from living bodies are produced separate offspring, which also lives and procreate. Using the procreation of chicken from the hen's egg as an example, Luther has no problem in accommodating the explanations of the natural philosophers, while at the same time identifying the working of the divine Word (that is, Christ) in the so-called normal methods of procreation:

The hen lays an egg; this she keeps warm while a living body comes into being in the egg, which the mother later hatches. The Philosophers advance the reason that these events take place through the working of the sun and her belly. I grant this. But the theologians say, far more reliably, that these events take place through the working of the Word, because it is said here: “He blessed them and said: ‘Increase and multiply.’” This Word is present in the very body of the hen and in all living creatures; the heat with which the hen keeps her eggs warm is the result of the divine Word, because if it were without the Word, the heat would be useless and without effect” . . . . What he [Moses] calls a blessing the philosophers call fertility.<sup>26</sup>

The blessing of God is one example of God's use of divine power to empower creatures to flourish. The blessing, of course, is not confined to the animals (Gen 1:22), but also pertains to the procreation of human beings (Gen 1:28). In an open letter to the preceptor Reizenbusch from 1525 Luther even went so far as to declare that the living Word of God (that is, Christ) is “the power through which the semen in the human body the becomes fertile, and the rutting



drive towards the women is created and sustained.”<sup>27</sup> This is seen from a man’s perspective, but Luther indeed affirms that Christ is the sexual power of fertility and erotic desire. But the word of Gen 2:18 (“It is not good for human beings to be alone”) is taken to mean that the human sexuality is not only god-given, but also god-driven.

At the same time it is clear that just as the grace of God has several forms (some temporal, other eternal), so does blessing both have a corporeal and a spiritual scope. This becomes evident in Luther’s interpretation of the Aronitic Blessing:

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you,  
and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you,  
and give you peace (Num 6:24–26)

As is well-known, Luther reintroduced this Aronitic blessing on the Israelites into the *German Mass*. Since then this blessing (originally a part of the Jewish liturgy) has been the closing words of the pastor spoken to the community in Lutheran churches (at least in Germany and in the Nordic countries). No wonder therefore that Luther in 1532 wrote a full sermon, in the vernacular language, on *The Blessing that is Spoken to the People after the Mass*.

Luther here offers a Trinitarian explanation of the blessing. The first part applies to the corporeal life and its goods, says Luther. It is therefore presented as an exposition *en miniature* of the first article of faith:

So this blessing wishes for the people that God will give them all good, will protect and preserve them, that is, first of all that they will bodily thrive, will marry a faithful spouse, and receive food, clothing, and all that is necessary.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas our blessings are mere wishes, God’s blessing is effective, Luther points out. Thereby we also learn to be grateful, and to realize that we cannot maintain ourselves through our industry (*vleis*) and anxiety (*sorge*). Characteristically Luther adds that even though everything depends on God’s blessing and care, we should ourselves keep

working and taking care of one another, for we should do ours, while knowing that only God provides for the result. Thus the power of God and our attunement to God’s power (*cooperatio*) are commonly asserted.

The second part of the blessing, however, pertains to the spiritual dimension and to the soul. This is God’s Son revealing the face of God to the believers:

God the Lord shows himself to be friendly and comforting. He does not look upon with a sad (*saur*) or angry face, does not horrify your heart, but smiles at you joyously and as a father, so that you become happy and comforted through him, and have a joyous and cordial trust in him.<sup>29</sup>

For the Son of God is like the sun, which every morning lets its face shine over the whole world. It forgives the sinner unreservedly.

Finally, the third part of the blessing, spoken by the Holy Spirit, wishes peace and final victory “under the cross, death, Devil, and all the hellish entrances.” For God’s grace without us receiving the grace is not of any worth; therefore we ourselves must be able to fight against the devil and our sins.

For even though he has shown us grace, has forgiven us our sins, and adorned us with his Spirit, we still have in front of us, already now, the fight against the devil and the other sins.<sup>30</sup>

This work of renewal requires the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Luther can therefore conclude that the Aronitic blessing could simply be abbreviated as follows: “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit bless you.”<sup>31</sup> For just as the work of creation is attributed to the Father, so is the work of redemption attributed to the Son, whereas the Holy Spirit is attributed the task of daily sanctification as well as the final accomplishment in resurrection. Thus Luther’s sermon on the Aaronitic blessing at once points to the efficacy of divine action and to the full involvement or cooperation of the human person in the divine activity of preserving and renewing the world.

## Creation as Vocation

Hereby a close analogy emerges between the concept of blessing and the concept of *vocation*. Both concepts are rooted in the order of creation, but extend to the order of salvation. Both notions point to the primacy of divine action, while at the same time empowering the human person to be the fellow-worker with God.<sup>32</sup> Luther's doctrine of vocation has been laid out by the Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren in his classic exposition, *Luther's lära om kallelsen* from 1942, translated as *The Christian's Calling* in 1957. Wingren rightly points out that the clinging in faith to the Word of God and the use of human reasoning in worldly affairs constitutes a central tenet in Luther's thought. In his early career, however, Wingren used the distinction between law and gospel as his overarching interpretation of Luther: "A Christian lives in vocation and in the church. Vocation is the concrete form of law, and the church is the concrete form of the gospel."<sup>33</sup> This interpretation has recently been criticized by Kenneth Hagen. Hagen points out that Wingren overestimates the link between vocation and law in Luther's theology, and similarly underestimates the role of the Christian's spiritual calling. "Wingren has lumped together law, vocation, suffering, and death in an one-sided manner."<sup>34</sup> In the terminology employed in this article, Wingren does not see that the idea of vocation pertains to both *temporalia* and *spiritualia*, and that the grace of God is operative in both realms, also in creation and vocation (though never uncontested by the powers of evil). According to Hagen, Wingren bypasses the fact that the kingdom of the world includes both nature, government, the family, the arts and the sciences, which are the orders of divine creation wherein the Christian serves the neighbour. Wingren neglects the fact that the very concept of vocation has a variety of meanings. In his own word study on *vocation/vocare* in the Weimarer edition, Hagen discovers the verbal background of the noun *vocatio*, for it is always God who calls (just as it is God who blesses). Therefore the many meanings of God's calling:

The *vocatio* is a seamless continuum of 'call' The call embraces the Christian's life from beginning to end. We are called out of darkness to the gospel through baptism. We are to call upon the name of the Lord in prayer and praise. We live our callings both on earth as children of the heavenly father and as fathers and mothers, teachers and pastors. And in the last day we will be called. In each of these cases, the operative word is *vocare/vocatio*. God creates/calls out of nothing the things that are not and gives them life. The *vocatio* is the connection with God<sup>35</sup>

We find here the same interconnectedness between Luther's theology of creation and Luther's christology and pneumatology that we have noticed above. Just as we identified the model of the asymmetric co-presence of God and creatures (*unio creatoris et creaturae*) in Luther's eucharistic theology as well as in his theology of blessing, Hagen underscores how also God's calling and human vocation belong together: "The vocation is the connection with God."

Also the Tübingen theologian Oswald Bayer has recently reminded us that there is a gospel character to Luther's view of creation that has been neglected in Luther scholarship because of the overanxious fear of natural theology. For also the world of creation born out of the address of the divine Word in the beginning: "Für Luther ist Gottes zuverlässige, gläubensschaffende und glaubwürdige Anrede, seine Promissio, nicht nur im Bereich von Sakrament und Predigt fundamental, sondern auch im Bereich der Schöpfungslehre – was bis vor kurzem in der Lutherforschung nicht beachtet wurde."<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, this is a feature that is often expressed in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*: "If the Word is spoken, all things are possible, so that out of the water are made either fish or bird. Therefore any bird whatever and any fish whatever are nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language [grammar]."<sup>37</sup> Natural entities are thus seen as creative events ("nouns"), which carry a meaning in the divine grammar. Luther is therefore able to understand the world as full of witness: "The whole creation is the most wonderful book or Bible wherein God has described and painted himself."<sup>38</sup>

Therefore for Luther God does not withdraw from speaking of falling leaves in the autumn as entailing the message of the brevity of life, and of flowers, birds, children and lovers as signs of God's fatherly love. Not the world of creation is fallen, but humanity. Sin has become so ingrained in the human mind-set that we do not see the miracles of everyday life. Luther's *Tabletalks* give ample evidence of Luther's insistence on the continuing grace of God despite the fall. Certainly, no theologian of the cross can construct a theology solely on the basis of observations from nature. But Luther, as we have seen, argues the other way around. Based on the justification of sinners by Christ, and based on the experience of daily sanctification by the Holy Spirit, the Christian may come to see the works of God as the word of God: "Our home, farm, field, garden, and everything, is full of Bible, where God through his wondrous works not only preaches, but also knocks on our eyes, touches our senses, and somehow enlightens our hearts."<sup>39</sup>

Similar expressions can be found elsewhere in Luther's *Tabletalks* and sermons. However, creation is never seen by Luther as a neutral platform for neutral conversations between believers and non-believers. Rather, creation is and remains battlefield, as rightly seen by Gustaf Wingren.

I have so far pointed to the gospel elements in Luther's view of creation in order to counteract the previous tendency to equate creation with Law. But it should be kept in mind that the unreserved presence of Father, Son, and Spirit in the world of creation involves an ambiguity. Divine presence cannot be translated immediately into experiences of happiness and overflow. Paul Althaus, and other older Luther scholars, were right in pointing out that creation is and remains an ambiguous sign. "The inescapable living presence of God in all that exists is either the most blessed or the most terrible reality for a man [sic], depending on what he knows God's relationship to himself to be. It is never neutral but is always either saving or damning"<sup>40</sup> This statement is still, I believe, historically correct. It reminds us of the Augustinian heritage in Luther's theology of creation: What we see in creation does not only depend on what is out there, but far more on the

eyes that can (or cannot) discern the presence of God in creation.

## Conclusion

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For sure, it is only with the eyes of faith that God's works in creation may exemplify the unrestricted self-giving to creation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this faith involves an ontological commitment that can be spelled out in theological terms. For so intimately is the presence of Father, Son, and Spirit woven into in the texture of creation, that the world of creation can itself become a text. This text of creation involves signs of law as well as of the gospel, signs of death as well as sign of grace and love. But what Luther's theology of the cross claims that God is also actively present in the works of law and death, which serve to constrain and annihilate the human sins, and thus pave the way for the restoration and transformation of creation. Therefore one cannot take the Father, the Christ or Holy Spirit away from creation, and still have a creation. There is, according to Luther's doctrine of creation, no basis for speaking of a nature devoid of God. Creation minus Christ equals nothingness. Creation, on the other hand, equals God's Word and Work. The Word and Works of God are as inseparable as are the two natures of Christ in the communion between the living creator, and the creatures that from moment to moment live out of God's hand.

If this interpretation of Luther's theology of creation is substantially correct (even though much should be added), the world of creation is the common product of the distinctive actions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There are not only traces of Trinity in creation (*vestigia trinitatis*). Rather the Triune life of self-giving pervades the realm of creation to the effect that the original blessing of God is prior to the original sin of human beings. Human beings are never able to create an alternative world without the presence of God's grace.

## Endnotes

1. This Luther Lecture 2004 was presented at Pacific Lutheran Theological School (PLTS), Berkeley October 13, 2004. A modified version of this lecture, focussing more on pneumatology, will appear in a forthcoming Festschrift for Anne Marie Aagaard, *Cracks in the Walls: Essays on Spirituality, Ecumenicity, and Ecclesiology*, eds. Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen and Johannes Nissen (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2005).

2. "Sermon 25. May 1544", *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 57 vols. Eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883ff), vol. 49:434 (henceforth abbreviated as WA, followed by volume and pagination). Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie: Eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck 2003) 102.

3. Cf "The Smalcald Articles" par. 8: "[I]t must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, 'the spirits', who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word", *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 322.

4. Martin Luther, "Rationis Latomianae confutatio" (1521), WA 8, 103–104. English translation in "Against Latomus", *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1958), vol 32, 133–200. This translation is henceforth abbreviated as LW, followed by volume and pagination.

5. Martin Luther, "In Genesin Declamationes" (1527), WA 24, 394, 4–6: "Wo von segn gesagt wird, da ist Euangelion, wo das Euangelion ist, da ist Gott mit Christo und allen guetern."

6. See, for example, the concise overview by Pekka Kärkkäinen, "Luthers Pneumatologie", *Luther between Present and Past*, Ulrich B. Nissen, Anna Vind, Bo Holm, and Olli-Pekka Vainio eds. (Schriften der Luther-Agricola Gesellschaft: Helsinki, 2004), 40–52. This division points in my view to a limitation in Luther's theology, which cannot be redeemed by hermeneutical manoeuvres.

7. See, for example, the overview by Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why Is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research", *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–21.

8. Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism", *The Book of Concord*, 354–55 (italics mine).

9. See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie*, 88. See also Bayer, "Creation as History", *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, Niels Henrik Gregersen, Bo Holm, Ted Peters, and Peter Widmann, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2004), 253–262.

10. See the still helpful overview in David Löfgren, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Martin Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960).

11. Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism", *The Book of Concord*, 432.

12. Ibid.

13. LW 37, 366; WA 26, 505–506 (italics mine).

14. Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism", *The Book of Concord*, 439.

15. LW 22, 8; WA 46, 543.

16. LW 1, 3 (to Gen 1:1); WA 42, 3 (italics mine).

17. LW 1, 11 (to Gen 1:2); WA 42, 9–10 (italics mine).

18. LW 37, 55.

19. LW 37, 57.

20. LW 37, 58

21. See further my essay, "Natural Events as Crystals of God: Luther's Eucharistic Theology and the Question of Nature's Sacramentality", *Concern for Creation: Voices on the Theology of Creation* (Tro & Tanke 1995:5), Viggo Mortensen ed. (Uppsala: Svenska Kyrkans Forskningsråd, 1995), 143–158.

22. LW 37, 223–228 (quotation 228); WA 26, 335–339.

23. LW 241–245; LW 33; WA 18, 752–754; See also WA 17 II, 192.

24. "Solid Declaration" VII. 38, *Book of Concord*, 599.

25. On the concept of blessing in Luther's theology, see Magdalene L. Frettlöh, *Theologie des Segens: Biblische und dogmatische Wahrnehmungen* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1998), 91–133, and Dorothea Greiner, *Segen und Segnen: Eine systematisch-theologische Grundlegung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999), 211–249.

26. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works* vol 1 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 53; WA 42, 39/40.

27. Martin Luther, "Christliche Schrift an W. Reizenbusch, sich in den ehelichen Stand zu begeben" (1525), WA 18, 275: "Und dies ist das Wort Gottes, durch wilchs krafft ynn des menschen leib samen zur frucht, and die bruennstige, natuerliche neigung zum weib geschaffen und erhalten werden."

28. WA 30/III, 574.

29. WA 30, III, 576.

30. WA 30, III, 580.

31. WA 30, III, 582.

32. See Gustaf Wingren, *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 123–43.

33. Wingren, op.cit. 123.

34. Kenneth Hagen, "A Critique of Wingren on Luther on Vocation", *Lutheran Quarterly* 16:3 (Autumn 2002), 249–274 (253).

35. Hagen, "A Critique of Wingren", 261.

36. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theologie*, 93.

37. *Lectures on Genesis*, LW 1, 49; WA 42, 37.

38. Martin Luther, "Sprüche aus dem Neuen Testament", WA 48, 201.

39. "Sermon 25. May 1544", WA 49, 434. Quoted from Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theologie*, 102.

40. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 111.